

## BELARUS

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Capital: Minsk

GDP per capita (PPP): \$7,500 (2000 est.)

Population: 10,350,194 (July 2001 est.)

Foreign Direct Investment: \$90,100,000

Inflation: 200% (2000 est.)

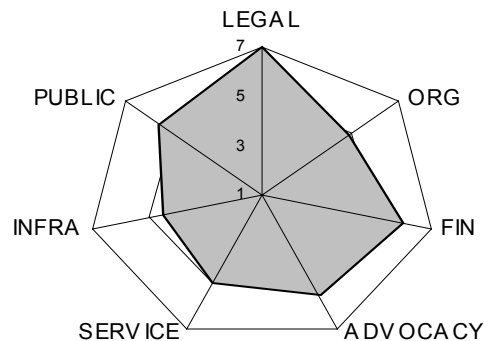
Unemployment: 2.1% officially registered  
(December 2000) large number of underemployed workers

### OVERALL DESCRIPTION: 5.4

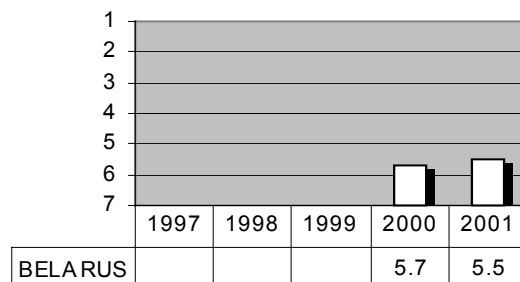
There are currently approximately 2,500 NGOs registered in Belarus. Meanwhile, it is estimated that there are nearly as many unregistered NGOs active in the country, as many organizations choose not to register due to the burdensome nature of the registration process.

NGOs operate in a wide range of fields, including interest clubs, political organizations, charitable and social societies, and research and educational associations. The most active NGOs work in the fields of social service, education, youth, sports, human rights protection, arts, history and culture.

The year 2001 was dominated by the September presidential elections. During the year, the government tightened existing legislation and used its administrative structures and the state-controlled mass media to neutralize and discredit democratic political parties and NGOs. Despite the undemocratic environment in Belarus, civil society struggles to flourish, as demonstrated by the non-partisan get-out-the-vote and observation campaigns organized during the 2001 presidential elections.



Annual Scores



### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 7.0

During the presidential election campaign, the government of Belarus stepped up its pressure on the third sector. As a result, it has become al-

most impossible for organizations deemed unacceptable to the government to register legally. For example, organizations are required to have a "le

gal address”, but the authorities refuse to rent them office space. Meanwhile, unregistered organizations and initiative groups have been subjected to severe persecution, often leading to fines or arrests of their leading activists.

The law does not protect NGOs from state interference. Over the past year, many organizations have had their technical equipment, including equipment financed by international donors, illegally confiscated. In addition, many organizations are plagued with endless inspections by controlling bodies ranging from the tax police to firefighters. Even the least “politicized” organizations – those dealing with social projects – are subject to these inspections.

NGOs have limited access to qualified legal assistance from regional resource centers. During the course of the election campaign, experienced law practitioners were intensively trained to work with NGOs in both large regional cen-

ters and small provincial towns.

In March 2001, Presidential Decree #8, “On certain measures to regulate the procedure of receipt and usage of foreign gratuitous aid”, came into effect. This decree imposed strict controls on the use of foreign donations. Among other regulations, it required that grants be registered with the Department for Humanitarian Activities.

According to Belarusian law, charitable donations and grants to NGOs are tax-exempt. However, since Decree #8 came into force, tax authorities have begun to demand tax payments from recipients of foreign grants, in some cases even when they are registered.

NGOs are subject to the same rates of taxation on earned income as for-profit companies. Neither individual nor corporate sponsors receive tax deductions for donations to NGOs.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.8**

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Most NGOs still have weak links with their constituents, with only the leading NGOs focused on constituency-building. While the pre-election mobilization campaign helped many organizations reach out beyond their traditional constituencies, this practice is not yet ingrained. To date, few NGOs utilize strategic planning techniques, but donor-supported training is slowly increasing understanding of the importance of thinking strategically.

The majority of NGOs have autocratic administrative structures and no clear delineation of responsibilities, in large part due to limited staff size. Only 5 to 10% of NGOs have permanent staff.

The oppressive environment in Belarus encourages both NGOs and donors to keep their transactions secret. The state attempts to control the use of all charitable donations and humanitarian aid. Unless a grant is registered with the Department for Humanitarian Activities, banks can freeze grant funds. Additionally, if not granted an individual tax exemption by the President, a grant may be significantly reduced by taxes.

NGOs have inadequate technical equipment. More than half of NGOs lack offices and communication equipment, and therefore rely on the resources of others.

### FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 6.0

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Local funding for the third sector is extremely limited as a result of the abysmal economic situation in the country. Another disincentive to local philanthropy is the fact that charitable donations by businesses often draw the attention of tax and other regulatory bodies.

Despite these unfavorable conditions, some organizations do succeed in raising funds locally. But even the most resourceful NGOs are unable to cover more than 20% of their budgets from local sources. As local support is insufficient, foreign donors remain the primary source of NGO funding. Few organizations seek to raise funds through other options such as membership dues or individual donations, although membership dues are the basis of some organi-

zations budgets, such as associations of businessmen. The state provides financial support only to pseudo-non-governmental organizations, which were created at the initiative of the state itself.

NGOs that receive their funding through the banking system are subject to strict government control and scrutiny. Under the circumstances, many NGOs use measures that are not fully transparent in order to protect themselves from state harassment and interference.

Donors encourage accountability and transparency through regular reporting and staff training. Nevertheless, most third sector organizations do not yet understand the benefits of making their operations transparent to the general public.

### ADVOCACY: 5.5

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NGOs occasionally cooperate successfully with local and national government entities, but this is rare. In general, relations between civil society and the state tend to be contentious at best. The Belarusian state expresses little desire to enter into a dialogue with the third sector, thereby depriving NGOs of communication channels or mechanisms to lobby or influence important national political decisions. However, there have been exceptional cases where NGOs were invited to participate in the discussion of national politics, as with the National Council for Gender Policy, which included representatives from three NGOs. The majority of NGOs, though, chose to boycott direct ties with their opponents through such councils.

There are some coalitions of NGOs but they do not conduct wide-scale cam-

paigns or utilize their members' resources effectively. The sector is gradually coming to understand the importance of a unified front to advocate for their interests. During the election period, coalition-building increased and there were a number of successful campaigns organized to advocate for NGOs rights and interests. For example, the *Dialogue* coalition brought together several organizations who opposed Decree #8. Thanks to a widespread information campaign, *Dialogue* succeeded in getting public hearings on the Decree, which was passed with a narrow one-vote majority.

Leading NGOs lobby for their constituents' interests. For example, associations of businessmen joined forces to attract attention to problems in the national economy and small and medium

business development. As a result of their efforts, Parliamentary hearings were held. However, the third sector generally fails to use even those channels that are available to them – such as

parliamentary discussions, appeals to administrative bodies, and judicial investigations – even though these methods do occasionally yield some success.

### **SERVICE PROVISION: 5.0**

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As a result of the state's aggressive policy towards the third sector and limited budget resources, NGOs only provide services in a narrow range of fields, primarily in the field of social services. It is difficult for NGOs to generate revenue by charging fees for services, as this entails a loss of tax benefits. Furthermore, the old Soviet mentality still prevails, meaning that most Belarusians are unwilling to pay for social services.

NGOs do provide some innovative services not provided by the state. For example, women's NGOs associated with the Women's Independent Democratic Movement started providing psychological counseling for women that was not available before. However, the state makes it difficult for NGOs to pro-

vide services to those who are not members. NGOs strive to meet demand, but there is no targeted market research of needs and available services.

As a rule, the state does not acknowledge the role or value of NGOs as alternative providers of goods and services, reflecting the state's view that NGOs are anti-governmental. However, there are a few examples of the state acknowledging the role of NGOs in solving community problems for example, the creation of local centers for family support. Even in such cases, the cooperation is superficial. In reality, the state has tried to co-opt the process, taking credit for the results itself, thereby perpetuating the illusion that the state has the capacity to solve all social problems.

### **INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.5**

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The Belarusian Association of Resource Centers (BARC) is a regional network providing information and technical support to local organizations in 63 towns. In general, these services are provided by NGOs that operate their own independent programs in addition to providing resource center services. BARC members provide smaller NGOs with technical, legal, educational, and fundraising assistance, and help NGOs find partners and form local coalitions. All services are provided free-of-charge. Micro-grant contests are also an important aspect of BARC activities. The contests are organized mostly to implement "first step" projects by initiative

groups or start-up NGOs in smaller towns and villages.

While there are a number of national and regional coalitions, and information is exchanged within the sector, NGOs often unite only to meet donor requirements that projects be implemented jointly. However, there is a growing understanding of the need to unite, which has resulted in the creation of five new coalitions involving approximately 100 NGOs that advocate on behalf of NGOs and coordinate election-related activities. The Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs played the most active role in organizing the civic election observation

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and non-partisan get-out-the-vote campaigns. A large coalition of citizens' organizations, Independent Observation, supported by USAID and OSCE, mobilized over 10,000 people to monitor voting throughout the country.

There are experienced trainers and consultants in all regions of the country,

but not all NGOs know where and how to get consultations. Training materials are available but are insufficient in number and variety. Inter-sectoral partnerships, particularly with business and mass media, are becoming increasingly common as common interests are realized.

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### PUBLIC IMAGE: 5.5

Media in Belarus is heavily controlled by the state. During the election campaign, the state-owned media – especially TV – was dominated by programs defaming public organizations that took a critical position of the government and supported alternative candidates.

The population is fairly ignorant of the work of NGOs, often associating NGO activity with the political opposition. This is partly due to the government's portrayal of NGOs and partly due to NGOs' actual involvement in politics.

NGO contacts with other sectors are rare. Little outreach occurs. The lack of public information limits the recruitment

of new customers and members. One exception to this lack of public outreach was the election mobilization campaign, during which NGOs used electronic and printed mass media, the Internet, booklets and brochures to highlight their activities.

NGO coalitions are at a nascent stage. Those that do exist adopt some informal codes of behavior, which are obeyed by the majority of members. The women's movement attempted, but failed, to develop an ethics code. This failure might reflect the competitiveness that still exists among organizations, as well as a weak understanding of the benefits of coalition-building.